

Commercialism, Counterculture, and the Folk Music Revival: A Study of *Sing Out!* Magazine, 1950–1967

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I INTRODUCTION

A cartoon in the February–March 1966 issue of *Sing Out!: The Folk Song Magazine* showed bourgeois parents asking their teenage daughter: “Why should we buy you a guitar just so you can sing against our way of life?”¹ The bespectacled, tie-wearing father and the dress- and necklace-wearing mother sit on the couch challenging the daughter who stands in front of them, with a stubborn frown of frustration, her fists clenched (Fig.1). This cartoon symbolized how the 1960s popularity of folk music was fuelled by the counterculture.² Yet while folk music, played with the guitar, represented the counterculture—rejection of the mainstream way of life that was characterized by commercialism and conformity—the very means of resisting mainstream culture was achieved through consumption.

This paper demonstrates how the folk music revival depended on commercialism to prosper despite possessing inherent anti-commercialist roots. The idea of resisting commercialism through consumption was central to the folk music revival. Analysis of the folk music magazine *Sing Out!*, between 1950 and 1967, reveals that even this left-wing folk music magazine, intent on circulating the “people’s music” unavailable

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"Why should we buy you a guitar just so
you can sing against our way of life?"

Drawing by Donald Bellis

© 1965 The New Yorker Magazine Inc.

Fig. 1.

to the public through commercial media, debated commercialism, included ads for folk instruments, and over time even increased the number of ads it carried that were similar to those in the mainstream. The advertisements in the magazine appropriated the language of anti-commercialism and sold products by stressing the authenticity and the pre-modern aspects of the product. As Thomas Frank demonstrated in his study of the advertising industry and the men's clothing business in the 1960s, mainstream commercialism was not a static antithesis to the counterculture; business rejuvenated itself through anti-conformist rhetoric.³ The complexity of the relationship between mainstream commercialism and counterculture was exemplified in the folk music revival.⁴

During the period between the late 1950s and the 1960s, folk music enjoyed an unprecedented popularity in the United States. In 1960, for example, *Time* magazine announced that "the U.S. is smack in the middle of a folk-music boom." According to the article, the enthusiasm for folk music allowed some 50 professional folk singers to make decent livings from performing folk music. At folk music festivals, audiences brought guitars and banjos and played their own instruments as well as listening to the professional performances.⁵ Around the same time, *Newsweek* reported that folk music concerts that featured such popular folk music artists as the Weavers, Theodore Bikel, Pete Seeger, and Odetta attracted so many people that halls with capacities of from 1,000 to 4,000 were easily filled by ardent audiences, many of whom were from colleges and cities.⁶ The folk music revival was indeed a major social phenomenon.

Western scholars have traditionally defined folk music as anonymous music of communal origin that was orally transmitted and played by amateurs, becoming altered through transmission and therefore existing in variants.⁷ Folk music therefore has been distinguished from popular (commercial) music, which is created and performed by trained professionals for profit and is disseminated through media.⁸ From the end of the nineteenth century to the early twentieth century, American and British folklorists searched for and collected folk music from the rural South under the assumption that music in rural areas had escaped commercial influence. The scholars intended to preserve folk music that would otherwise vanish in the face of a rapid urbanization. In the 1930s, folk music came to have a left-wing political bent, as activists came to regard folk music as the voice of the working people and as a weapon for social change, and promoted songs and folksingers in northern cities.⁹ Around the same time, professional singers started to sing and compose folk music, which made the traditional definition of folk as anonymous and amateur obsolete. As a result, “folk” came to include a wider variety of music. After World War II, folk music attracted many college-educated young men and women who regarded the music as representing alternative values to those that dominated mainstream American culture. This paper follows the following definition of the folk music revival by Robert Cantwell:¹⁰

Between, roughly, 1958, when the collegiate Kingston Trio recorded an Appalachian murder ballad, “Tom Dooley,” which sold nearly four million discs, and 1964, when the Beatles and other British groups began to colonize American popular music, folksongs, and original songs conceived and performed as such, enjoyed an unprecedented commercial popularity, inspiring thousands of young middle-class men and women to learn songs, to accompany themselves on folk instruments, particularly guitar and banjo, to search out and lionize authentic folk musicians, and finally to dress, groom, speak, comport themselves, and even attempt to think in ways they believed compatible with the rural, ethnic, proletarian, and other marginal cultures to whom folksong was supposed to belong.¹¹

With the rise of the mass media and the increased professionalization of folk music, the definition of folk music as non-commercial music had become quite fragile in reality by the time of the folk music revival. Still, the anti-commercial aura of folk music was becoming ever more present and important to young people opposing mainstream contemporary American culture. As Susan Douglas has noted, folk music was an

antithesis of commercial, popular music that offered an expression of the counterculture:

Contemptuous of the commercialization that seemed to infuse and debase every aspect of American culture, and hostile to bourgeois values and the profit motive, members of that loose yet cohesive group known as the counterculture were revolutionizing almost every aspect of American culture. And music was central to their individual and generational identity, their sense of having a different, more enhanced consciousness about society, politics, and self-awareness.¹²

In addition to anti-commercialism, anti-mass culture sentiment was central to the folk music revival. Folk music appreciators considered themselves different from the masses in the sense that they preferred obscure music and rejected mainstream popular culture. As one commentator put it at the time, “they like folk music because the whole country isn’t singing it.”¹³

Scholars have pointed out the post-war conformity and consumerism that pervaded the nation during the 1950s and also the discontent of the white middle class which led to the New Left activism, the student movements, and the counterculture of the 1960s. For example, Wini Breines has portrayed the discontent of white middle class young women with conformist domestic ideals and their search for “authentic,” “real,” or “genuine”¹⁴ experience. Elaine Tyler May has argued that consumerism was a strong Cold War ideology.¹⁵ Doug Rossinow argued that “new left radicals launched what many have called a ‘postscarcity’ radicalism, directing their basic criticism at the ‘affluent society’ itself, which they, along with many liberals and conservatives of the 1950s and the 1960s, considered an achieved fact.” According to Rossinow, authenticity was the remedy for alienation in a society characterized by abundance, mass consumption, and bureaucratization.¹⁶ As Cantwell has noted, folk music was considered authentic because of its marginal and pre-modern origins. On the other hand, Thomas Frank contends that the consumer-oriented, conformist mainstream American culture to which the counterculture was opposed also went through changes, negating the binary narrative of the “conformist fifties, rebellious sixties.”¹⁷ This paper extends the work of these authors with a close examination of *Sing Out!*, which has rarely been studied, from multiple perspectives, including its producer’s testimony, published opinion articles, and advertisements.

II *SING OUT!* HISTORY AND ITS COMMERCIAL DILEMMA: PRODUCERS' PERSPECTIVE

Sing Out! began in 1950, before the folk music revival became prominent, as a left-wing periodical that published "people's music": folk-songs that expressed the "hopes and fears and lives of common people."¹⁸ It was established by Old Left activists who criticized capitalism and the commercialism that it spawns. Irwin Silber, who served as editor during the period 1950–1967, recalls the ideology that was held among the founders of *Sing Out!* as follows:

An America based on the celebration of "working people" and the "common man"; the trade union movement and the hope that it would be the driving force for a "better" America; a commitment to racial equality; anti-fascism; and a sense that communism as we knew it was a political and spiritual force in that process.¹⁹

In the first issue of the magazine, Silber argued that contemporary music "[had] nothing to do with the people anymore" and he emphasized the magazine's mission to collect and distribute songs that "serve the common cause of humanity."²⁰

The idea of using music for the betterment of society was not new. The precursor of *Sing Out!* was *People's Songs*, a monthly bulletin started by artists and enthusiasts who sought to combine music with political activism, such as Pete Seeger, Woody Guthrie, Lee Hays, Paul Robeson, Alan Lomax, Irwin Silber, and Earl Robinson, who founded People's Artists Inc. While the bulletin contributed to the rise of topical song making, it alienated labor unions who, with the beginning of the Cold War, sought to distance themselves from groups of intellectuals suspected of being communists.²¹ *People's Songs* went bankrupt after the 1948 presidential election, in the run-up to which "*People's Songs* and its resources had been pressed into service for the candidacy of Henry Wallace and the Progressive Party."²²

Although *Sing Out!* was the successor of *People's Songs*, the magazines had different audiences. *Sing Out!* attracted a young, college-educated audience whose "collective energy would soon be aimed for social change and humanitarian causes."²³ As Pete Seeger recalled, middle-class young people were the bearers of the folk music revival, contradicting the 1930s intellectuals' prediction that the revival would emerge from the working-class.²⁴ According to a later editor, *Sing Out!* magazine

was “the primer for this nonconformity” in the sense that the magazine was dedicated to music involved with social causes, as opposed to music for art’s sake, or music for commercial profit.²⁵

The magazine was not widely read during the early 1950s, partially because of its overt political outlook. Irwin Silber remembers that the magazine was a “hand-to-mouth operation” to the extent that they would not have minded taking advertisements in the early days. However, the circulation was too small to attract advertisers, and in addition, “in the McCarthyism years, most ‘commercial’ advertisers did not want to be seen as associating with us.”²⁶ Circulation rose dramatically as folk music became a boom in the late 1950s, rising from 500 in 1951 to 1,000 in 1960, then growing to 20,000 in 1964, and 25,000 in 1965.²⁷ *Sing Out!* started to attract advertisers who regarded the magazine’s audience as a potential market for folk-related music products. Silber and others in *Sing Out!* accepted ads on the grounds that they “promoted products— instruments, records, artists—that were clearly of interest to the readers.” However, he recalls, “as the boom peaked and as our circulation grew, some of the ads took on a more commercial tone. Many of the ads that came in were designed by professional agencies.”²⁸ Roger Deitz reported in the 45 year anniversary issue of *Sing Out!* that “corporate America was devouring folk music as we knew it, and regurgitating it in its own image, and *Sing Out!* got a boost from the movement.”²⁹

There was an internal split in the editorial board of *Sing Out!* in terms of how to reconcile commercialism and the political mission of the magazine. Silber insisted on maintaining a political stance and refused to soften the magazine’s politics in order to attract advertisers. He believed that the magazine lost some potential advertisers because of its politics.³⁰ On the other hand, Moses Asch, the founder of Folkways Records and the other owner of *Sing Out!*, was in favor of reaching a wider audience by making the music more eclectic and softening the magazine’s politics. Ironically enough, however, Silber was more tolerant of commercial advertisements than Asch, who had his own record company but could not afford to employ professional advertising agencies.³¹

Despite Silber’s determination to maintain the magazine’s politics, it was gradually depoliticized. As Robert Cantwell argued, the magazine started to disassociate itself from its political predecessor, and by the early 1960s “its credo was that of a global youth movement without an articulated politics.”³² The new commercialization was most evident in the increased number of advertisements in the magazine. In the first sev-

eral years, advertisements in the magazine resembled announcements. However, by the turn of the 1960s, advertisements for guitars, banjos, instruction books, songbooks, and records became more common and, within several years, advertisements “represented nearly every folk record label and instrument manufacturer.”³³ For example, the September 1965 issue of *Sing Out!* has thirty-two pages of advertisements, nearly half of the volume. However, as the folk music revival declined, the magazine lost its readers and finally stopped circulation due to lack of funding in 1967. When it was resumed in 1968 with a new editor, the magazine refashioned itself as a guide to making personal songs, further dissociating itself from politics.³⁴

The history of *Sing Out!* demonstrates that while the magazine was intended to disseminate non-commercial music, it was highly influenced by the commercial success of folk music. However, it was not as though the anti-commercial magazine simply gave in to commercialism. The producers of the magazine made a conscious effort to maintain the magazine’s identity. On the other hand, the advertisers, too, “understood that typical commercial hype would be counter-productive to them” and so tailored their advertisements to fit in the magazine. To Silber, the way to reconcile folk music with commercial activity was “dependent on remaining small—on the fringes of standard business. Attempts to stand totally clear of such things as advertising in a magazine such as ours was—and still is—inevitably futile.”³⁵

III DEBATES OVER COMMERCIALIZATION: ARTICLES FROM *SING OUT!*

Negotiations over commercialism also took place in the text of *Sing Out!* as participants in the folk music revival sent in opinion articles to the magazine. Along with the commercial popularity of folksongs, came criticism of commercialization, and *Sing Out!* included articles on the debate. Central to these arguments is the question of authenticity—who are real folksingers? As historian Benjamin Filene has demonstrated, the authenticity of folk music and folksingers were important concepts in folk music. Filene argues that authenticity was often defined in terms of Otherness: authentic folk musicians were “expected to be premodern, unrestrainedly emotive, and noncommercial. Singers who too closely [resembled] the revival’s middle-class audiences [were] rejected by those audiences as ‘inauthentic.’”³⁶ In *Sing Out!* articles, too, some

critics remained suspicious of the folksong “revivalists” from urban, educated backgrounds who were commercially successful. On the other hand, other critics regarded them as the inheritors of folk traditions who would eventually become part of those traditions themselves. The debate revealed not only the ways in which people identified the positives and negatives of commercialization but also the ways in which these critics attempted to figure the position of commercialism in the folk music revival.

In an article titled “Commercialism and the Folksong Revival,” Ron Radosh argued that commercial folksingers lowered the quality of folk music and folklore. He wrote: “Today, in 1959, America is enjoying its largest ‘folksong revival.’ It is a revival, however, devoid to a large degree of any of the content or understanding of the folk tradition which characterizes the art form.”³⁷ What characterized the art form, according to Radosh, was the “sincerity and meaning that have distinguished it from the contrived music of Tin Pan Alley.”³⁸ Radosh wrote that commercial success itself was not a problem; for example, the Weavers’ commercial success was justified because they were true to the spirit of traditional folk culture. The Kingston Trio, however, according to Radosh, had brought “good folk music to the level of the worst in Tin Pan Alley music.” He concluded his impassioned article by warning that serious appreciators of folk music should stop “patronizing prostitutes of the art who gain their status as folk artists because they use guitars and banjos.”³⁹ One can see from his criticism the assumption that authentic folk music should remain traditional and keep its distance from the mainstream commercial music of Tin Pan Alley.

Alan Lomax and John Cohen exchanged opinions in the Summer 1959 issue. Lomax argued that the folk-song revival “that began back in the thirties as a cultural movement, with overtones of social reform,”⁴⁰ was gaining college-educated middle-class audiences as well as a profit-motivated attention from business in the late 1950s. Lomax criticized urban folksingers who “translate folk music in ways that make it more understandable and acceptable to their market—an urban middle-class group, with a college background,”⁴¹ because they left out the “singing style” and “emotional content”⁴² of the original folksongs. According to Lomax, urban folksingers learned songs from books and spent only a short time on music techniques. So, Lomax identified rural folksingers as the authentic carriers of tradition and the urban revivalists as those who imitate the traditional music superficially.

In response, John Cohen, a member of the urban folksinging group New Lost City Ramblers, wrote "In Defense of City Folksingers"⁴³ and challenged the authenticity attached to rural folksingers. Cohen argued that city folksingers had contact with traditional folksongs through first-hand research and Library of Congress recordings, not just from books. Cohen also refuted the idea that urban singers were inferior imitators of the authentic rural singers. For example, he claimed that urban singers had the merit of being free from the kind of limitation that rural folksingers had. The "individual search for value" was "becoming the tradition of the city" and city folksingers were developing their own folk music.⁴⁴ Cohen thus contended that the urban folk revival singers were the bearers and makers of tradition.

Another angry attack on the commercialization of folk music, "Folksongs, Fakelore, and Cash" by G. Legman appeared a year later.⁴⁵ Legman expressed his anger toward music professionals and academics who he thought co-opted folk music with greedy motives and on the basis of dubious qualifications. Legman insisted that the "development of folk-arts into commercialized frauds is getting to be standard." In contrast to Lomax, who criticized "folkkniks" for lacking direct contact with rural folksingers, Legman attacked folkkniks for their lack of education—Legman's folkkniks were so lazy they never made the effort to go to the Library of Congress or to go through published folksong collections. The "folksongers" indiscriminately sang songs from exotic places in the world without any belief or knowledge in them and "folklore-fakers" plagiarized folksongs collected by others and published them under their own names. Legman summarized the situation by claiming that they "*are all out for the money*, plus a goodly bit of cheap public attention and acclaim." Describing the folk music boom as "this new infestation of entertainment-industry leeches and lice," he insisted that the "quick buck" trend in contemporary folk boom would undermine serious folklore.

In response to Legman's attack, in particular regarding the fake folklore scholarship that Legman criticized, folklorist D. K. Wilgus defended folklore scholarship by arguing that "the noisy surface of the revival is on the one side hardening into hysterical cult, and on the other being commercialized for the mass market. The serious remnant is quietly capturing the academic bastions and will soon speak for itself far better than I can."⁴⁶ Wilgus therefore contended that the folklore scholarship avoided taking either of the two extreme arguments and remained sound.

The debate over commercialism continued in 1962, with Stephen Fiott's article "In Defense of Commercial Folk Song."⁴⁷ Fiott argued that collegiate, commercial folksingers should be given credit for bringing folksongs to the wider American public. Also, Fiott argued that since all folk music was made at some point by someone and tradition was constantly created, it followed that contemporary commercial folksingers also created tradition as opposed to ruining it: "And after all, folk means people. People make traditions—maybe the Trio has started a new tradition."⁴⁸ He criticized folk music purists who called commercial folksingers fake: "Traditions, songs, and styles are born every day. Today's tradition in folk music is commercialization; the folk want it way."⁴⁹ Thus Fiott proposed a view that regarded commercialism as a factor that developed folk music instead of something that ruined the music.

In response, an article titled "'Commercial' Folksongs—Product of 'Instant Culture'" by Dan Armstrong appeared in the February-March 1963 issue.⁵⁰ Armstrong refuted Fiott's idea that the commercialization of folk music was a new tradition. To him, tradition meant "men working and building and trying to get along in hard times and singing to make it all a little easier and meaningful." He argued that the new folk music had been conceived as part of the "Instant Culture" that had come to characterize America. Folk music, according to Armstrong, had been "pretied up," "watered down," and made "safe" and "unoffensive." Far from starting a new tradition, Armstrong argued, the Kingston Trio introduced conformity into folk music. He further argued that in order to truly carry a folk tradition the revivalist should follow the footsteps of Pete Seeger—travel and empathize with the folk in order to uncover tradition. Armstrong regarded commercialism as a negative force in the development of folk music, tied to a sense of conformity that folk music had initially opposed.

Articles that appeared in *Sing Out!* revealed that the relationship between commercialism and the folk music revival was complex and contested. The critics did not agree on what commercialism meant, who the "real" folk singers were, who were not, or, even if that distinction existed, but seriously debated how to resolve the apparent contradiction between folk music and commercialism. In fact, the critics by that time could not ignore commercialism in assessing the folk music revival.

IV CONSUMING THE ANTI-COMMERCIAL MUSIC: COMMODIFICATION OF THE FOLK MUSIC REVIVAL

Not only was folk music commercialized and made into a commercial product, but also the experience of participating in the folk music revival was commodified through mass produced goods.⁵¹ Robert Cantwell suggested that the tendency to consume folk music was inevitable. He argued that in the 1950s, “American neighborhood and community life became fields of industrial production, distribution, and consumption.” Fueled by the wartime ethos toward consumerism, “[n]o longer was it [participation in the market] an appeal, a seduction; it had become compulsory.”⁵² Cantwell also pointed out “the sad contradiction inherent in a process that can grow off commercialism and other forms of hegemony only by means of them” and noted that the folk music revival “would ultimately evaporate in its own commercial medium.”⁵³ Just as for the teenage girl in the cartoon mentioned at the beginning of this paper, for many young middle-class men and women who joined the counterculture through folk music, resisting mainstream commercial culture took the form of consuming commodified products such as instruments and records.

Entry into the folk music revival by means of consumption was apparent as a practice from as early as the early 1950s. In 1953, Pete Seeger held a concert at Swarthmore College and converted at least two students who would later become important folklorists. Ralph Rinzler and Roger Abrahams, both then students from bourgeois families, attended the Pete Seeger concert and were extremely moved. They recalled: “We realized that this was what we wanted to do for the rest of our lives.”⁵⁴ Rinzler and Abrahams went out to buy banjos immediately and “in a few years both were well established as revivalist musicians.”⁵⁵ While the two men were attracted to Seeger’s sense of authenticity, of the “coming together of ideology and musicianship,” the first step they took was consumption—buying banjos. This anecdote suggests the extent to which the folk music revival was dependent on commodities. That Rinzler and Abrahams could just go out and buy banjos also suggests the availability of the instruments.

The ease with which people became “folksingers” was ridiculed by

jazz critic Robert Reisner, who pointed out the same phenomenon: “Folk music is the shortcut to becoming an ‘entertainer’ these days. . . . You buy a guitar, learn three chords, and you are set.”⁵⁶ On the surface Reisner criticized the insignificance of the folk music craze. However, his comment also reveals that guitars were easily available for purchase. The popularity of folk music depended on the mass production and distribution system, provided by the corporate system that the counterculture opposed.

The commodification of folk instruments is discussed in *Sing Out!* magazine in 1965, when folksinger Barbara Dane reported on the convention of the National Association of Music Merchants in Chicago. Dane pointed out that musical instruments had become a big business due to the popularity of folk music. The business targeted folksong enthusiasts as potential customers and provided products for all levels of amateur musicians, for example, a “‘Chordomonica’ with a ‘built-in harmonic structure which makes discords impossible and permits chords that were previously unavailable.’”⁵⁷ In other words, “people are trying to spend money for music and there is really something for everyone.”⁵⁸ Dane noted a huge shift from when she “had to tramp many a mile to find decent strings, when the average music store never heard of an auto-harp or a guitar other than Hawaiian, orchestra, or cowboy.”⁵⁹

Dane believed that people should actively play music by themselves rather than passively listening to professional musicians, encouraging amateur musicians with the call “Up with homemade music.” She clearly agreed with the opinion of one of the wholesalers at the convention that “there remains a substantial desire on the part of Americans *to be entertained* rather than entertain themselves,” nonetheless “people must have the opportunity to play for enjoyment.”⁶⁰ Obviously, there are different motives behind the support of amateur musicians and the “do-it-yourself” position encouraged by folksingers; while the instrument wholesaler wanted to gain a larger share of consumers to rival record companies and concerts, the folksinger wanted to promote music-making as a reaction against a passive mass culture.

In a similar vein to “Chordomonica,” a short-cut to becoming a folksinger was promoted in an advertisement that appeared in *Sing Out!*. The “Elektra Folk Song Kit” provided instructions to the impatient consumer who wanted to become a folksinger instantly. According to the ad, the “kit” include the following (Fig.2):

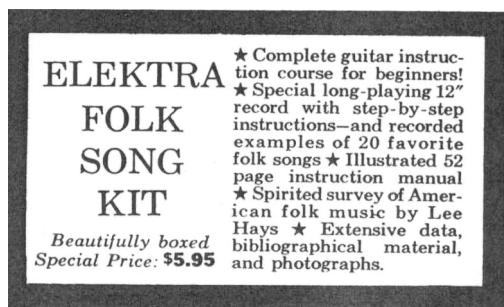


Fig.2.

Complete guitar instruction course for beginners!
 Special long-playing 12" record with step-by-step instructions—and recorded examples of 20 favorite folk songs
 Spirited survey of American folk music by Lee Hays
 Extensive data, bibliographical material, and photographs⁶¹

The whole kit was “beautifully boxed” and sold at the “special price” of \$5.95. The kit, representing a commodification of the process of becoming a folksinger, showed that the central credo of the folk music revival was also intertwined with commercialism.

Commodification of folk music, manifested in the mass production of guitars and banjos, was needed to achieve the anti-mass cultural goals of the folk music revival. “Do-it-yourself” was a central credo of the folk music revival. Endorsed most typically by Pete Seeger, this idea encouraged enthusiasts of folk music to play and make music instead of simply listening to professional singers. Even at concerts, audiences were encouraged to “sing along,” a practice for which Seeger was especially famous. Folk music appreciators were at the same time encouraged to play (and preferably compose) music on their own accompanied by guitars or banjos. Everyone participating in this way needed guitars.

Folk instrument sales increased dramatically, with the growth of the folk music boom. Pete Seeger remarked as early as 1956 that annual guitar sales exceeded half a million.⁶² In less than a decade, the guitar industry became a multi-million dollar business. In 1965, *Business Week* had an article entitled “Guitars hit a cashbox crescendo” to report the dramatic increase in guitar sales. It read: “The music of \$100-million a year in sales is sweet to the ears of manufacturers. So great is the boom, some dealers are pleading for instruments and imports are finding a big market.” According to the article, between 1960 and 1965, guitar sales

increased from 420,000 units to 1,065,000; \$22 million retail sales to \$95 million, while an estimated 150,000 used guitars were sold in 1964.⁶³ In the meantime, banjo sales also increased by five times between 1959 and 1960.⁶⁴

There were other good arguments to justify commodification than simply that mass-produced instruments helped music-making. For example, Moses Asch suggested that consumption of recorded music did not necessarily contradict the spirit of folk music as anti-commercial. He argued in his article "Is Cash Killing Folk Music?" that the serious folk music appreciator should listen to folk records "in a quiet corner" rather than immersing himself in festivals and coffeehouses.⁶⁵ Asch therefore contended that the apparently passive act of listening to recordings was also an authentic part of the folk music revival. Commodification of folk music catered to a variety of interests and motives, from ardent folk musicians wanting to spread music-making to business people seeking to make profit.

V ADVERTISEMENTS IN *SING OUT!* MAGAZINE

Despite *Sing Out!*'s anti-commercial outlook and origins, the advertisements placed in the magazine reflected the changes that took place in the mainstream commercial world during the 1960s. Furthermore, the development recapitulated the history of mainstream advertising outlined by historian Roland Marchand in his study of advertising in the 1920s and the 1930s.⁶⁶ According to Marchand, American advertising went through a dramatic change at the turn of the century, moving from advertisements which explained products rationally to those that employed extensive visual images and stressed the consumers and the impact the product would have on them. Modern advertising assumed the role of an advisor, teaching consumers how to cope with changes brought by modernity. This change in advertising style was apparent by the 1920s; however, the older style survived and coexisted with the newer style. Similarly, advertising in *Sing Out!* also made the transition from announcement ads to producer-oriented ads to consumer-oriented ads that offered consumers solutions to the problem of living with social changes in the 1960s. Mainstream advertising of popular culture and folk advertising in fact were parallel.


The ads in *Sing Out!* also reflected the changes that took place during the 1960s in the advertising industry. In his study of the relationship

between the counterculture and advertising, Thomas Frank argued that contrary to the common assumption that all business embodied the conformity that counterculture opposed, advertising agencies were in the forefront of breaking out of the conformity that had characterized the 1950s. According to Frank, during the 1960s, “the makers of American advertising would rank among the country’s most visible critics of the mass society.”⁶⁷ A prime example of anti-mass culture, anti-conformity advertising that nevertheless encouraged consumption of mass produced goods was that produced for Volkswagen, which acquired a hip image despite its Nazi origins as a result of its advertising campaigns.⁶⁸ Frank argued that advertising agencies went through their own counterculture, the Creative Revolution. By 1965, advertising styles had changed dramatically from “square” to “hip.” As a result of the Creative Revolution, advertisements became self-referential, cynical, and stressed individuality.

In the early 1950s, *Sing Out!* contained few advertisements, with the exception of the occasional appearance of songbooks. In the next decade, especially after 1958, the magazine became highly commercial. Whole pages were devoted solely to advertisements, with pictures and elaborate explanations of the product. By 1965, almost half the pages of the magazine were devoted to advertisements.

Advertisements from the 1950s resembled announcements and were closer to the type of early advertisements discussed by Marchand—small, inconspicuous boxes with companies’ names. For example, Terminal Music company in New York posted a small, modest, and straightforward ad, about 1/4 of the page, simply stating what they had (Fig.3).⁶⁹ The ad did not tell a story, did not include an image that the audience identified with; it simply gave pertinent information about the products.

More elaborate advertisements appeared in 1961 (Fig.4).⁷⁰ The Guild Guitar ad stressed brand identification, a typical tactic of the new advertising which flourished in the 1920s. In addition to listing the company’s name and address at the bottom, as the earlier ad did, this ad had the company’s name in big letters, thus reinforcing brand identification. Anti-mass culture sentiment was expressed in the phrase “Traditional Craftsmanship!” on the top of the ad. In the body of the ad, a picture showed a man making a guitar. Underneath it says, “Guild. Two months in the making, from craftsman’s hands to yours . . . the new Guild Classic Guitar inspires, excites, commands your audience . . . reserve your copy



**Everything
for the
Folk Guitarist**

- C. F. Martin Guitars -
Spanish and Classic
- Kueng and Dolmetsch
Recorders
- Special: Folk Guitar -
\$20.00 (Good Tone)
- Guitar, Recorder and all
instrumental music

TERMINAL MUSIC
113 West 48th Street
(Between 6th and 7th Ave.)
New York 36, N. Y.
Circle 5 - 5270

**Complete set of nylon guitar
strings - \$1.19 per set - limit
two sets - with this ad only.**

Fig. 3.

of our Classic brochure now, without obligation.” In addition, the slogan, together with the picture of the guitar being hand-made, suggested that the guitars made by this company were not mass-produced and therefore more suited to the spirit of the folk music revival. As in the earlier ads, the emphasis was still on the product.

Other advertisements stressed the “craftsmanship” of the producers of the instruments. For example, the Ode Company’s banjo advertisement insisted that their banjos were handmade and that they were sold to the customers without the intermediary step of buying from retailers (Fig.5). The ad reads: “The Exciting Revival of ‘CRAFTSMANSHIP’ ODE ‘Hand-Crafted’ Banjos SOLD DIRECT FROM FACTORY TO CONSUMER. From \$79.”⁷¹ Although it is not clear what the quotation marks around the words “craftsmanship” and “hand-crafted” were supposed to mean, their selling point was in accordance with the anti-corporate, anti-commercial sentiment shared by folk music fans.

Traditional Craftsmanship!



Guild TWO MONTHS IN THE MAKING, from craftsman's hands to yours . . . the new Guild Classic Guitar inspires, excites, commands your audience. See and play one of the four new Guild Classic models . . . or reserve your copy of our Classic brochure now, without obligation.

Distributed through America's finest music dealers by:
GUILD GUITARS, INC., HOBOKEN, NEW JERSEY
PACIFIC MUSIC SUPPLY CO., Los Angeles • TARG & DINNER, INC., Chicago

Fig. 4.

The Exciting Revival of
"CRAFTSMANSHIP"
ODE
"Hand-Crafted" Banjos

SOLD DIRECT FROM
FACTORY TO
CONSUMER
From \$79

Write For Our New Illustrated Catalogue

The ODE Company
5433 NORTH BROADWAY BOULDER, COLORADO

Fig. 5.

Some ads used celebrities as endorsers. For example, the Vega company showed Pete Seeger's portrait beside a picture of a banjo to advertise the product. The ad read (Fig.6):

**Folk Banjos
by VEGA**



The pre-eminent banjo of all times is the VEGA. The PETE SEEGER MODEL is used by the great majority of the prominent folk artists, such as The Kingston Trio, Bob Gibson, The Limelighters, The Cumberland Three, The Brothers Four, Eric Darling, and others.

The EARL SCRUGGS MODEL is now available and features the novel "Scruggs Tuners" to change pitch. It is distinctive in construction and just the perfect tone for country-western music.

Regular models are also available from \$115 up.

12-STRING GUITARS
A few VEGA twelve-string guitars will be custom-built on special order. Ask your local dealer for information, or write directly to Vega Co. for free circulars.

THE VEGA CO. - 155 Columbus Ave. - Boston, Mass.

Fig. 6.

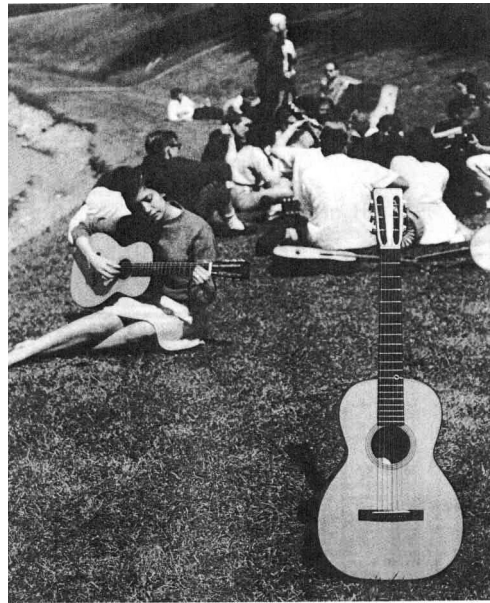
The pre-eminent banjo of all times is the VEGA. The PETE SEEGER MODEL is used by the great majority of the prominent folk artists, such as The Kingston Trio, Bob Gibson, The Limelighters, The Cumberland Three, The Brothers Four, Eric Darling, and others.

The EARL SCRUGGS MODEL is now available and features the novel "Scruggs Tuners" to change pitch. It is distinctive in construction and just the perfect tone for country-western music.⁷²

Instead of explaining the product's inherent quality, the ad sold the product through association with famous professional singers. While the focus of the ad is on the product rather than the consumer, there was a change in rhetoric.

The issues from the 1960s demonstrated the transition from the older-style, product-based ads to more emotional, visual, and consumer-oriented ads. The consumer-oriented ads featured images of consumers after they had purchased the product instead of focusing on the product. More and more pictures were employed to convey the image.

The Oct.-Nov. 1961 issue included a "New York Martin" guitar advertisement which showed young people on the grass in the background with their guitars and banjos while a young woman played the guitar, sitting comfortably on the grass apart from the crowd (Fig.7).⁷³ In the lower right-hand corner was the close up of the guitar itself. The ad did not explain much about the product except for the price and the note that said the guitar was used in the May Wind Gap Folk Festival. The major appeal of this ad was the picture which revealed the contrast between the crowd and the individual—the woman sitting alone with a guitar was potentially part of the crowd while maintaining her individuality. More



Introducing the
“New York Martin”

The “New York Martin” O-16 NY is shown here making a long overdue reappearance at the May Wind Grp Folk Festival. List #139.50. It’s another in the fine Martin line.

C. F. MARTIN & CO., 20 NORTH MAIN STREET, SAZABETH, PENNSYLVANIA - WHITE FOR FREE ILLUSTRATED CATALOG

Fig. 7.

than anything, the ad promised a way of life through the idyllic picture showing young people surrounded by nature; the possibility of maintaining individuality while still being part of a crowd. The tension between individuality and the mass was thus clearly illustrated in this ad. The ad represented the idea of asserting individuality through consumption, sending a similar message as the Volkswagen ad that Frank analyzed.

By the late 1960s, advertising stressed the individuality that stood out in the crowd while also portraying an attractive way of life for consumers. Especially after folk music turned electric in 1965, advertisements became even livelier and more obviously commercial. For example, the Feb-March 1966 issue included an ad for electric guitars with pictures of young men and women dancing. It read (Fig.8):

FREE RIDIN’ BEAT OF FOLK-ROCK
 Hear that beat?

the FREE RIDIN' BEAT of FOLK-ROCK

SLIM-LINE ELECTRIC GUITARS & BASSES
with the Fastest Playin' Necks, Ever

Hear that beat?

That's HAGSTROM'S hard drivin', foot stompin', FREE RIDIN' melodious BEAT. There'll be no holdin' you, now that you've got a HAGSTROM electric guitar or bass goin' for you.

For exciting electric guitar and bass literature, fill in, clip and mail this coupon TODAY.

NEWS
The HAGSTROM 12 string guitar gives increased quiet tones and increased fire to any performance. This guitar is known for its extra dimension of full rich sound... projects the sound of 6 guitars.

Send clip for your HAGSTROM 60-60 guitar catalog, in blurring color. PLUS VALUE! A heavy HAGSTROM guitar FREE... absolutely FREE! HAGSTROM MUSICAL PRODUCTS CORPORATION 23 PARK STREET, WESTPORT, N.Y., NEW YORK 10980

NAME _____
ADDRESS _____
CITY _____ STATE _____ ZIP # _____

Yes! I'd like free literature concerning Solid State HAGSTROM guitar & bass amplifiers.

88 SING OUT

Fig. 8.

That's HAGSTROM'S hard drivin', foot stompin', FREE RIDIN' melodious BEAT. There'll be no holdin' you, now that you've got a HAGSTROM electric guitar or bass goin' for you.⁷⁴

In addition to reflecting the turn of the folk music revival into folk-rock, the ad illustrated the way of life that the product would provide. The word play and the use of colloquial language exemplified the shift of advertisements from "square" to "hip."

The July 1965 issue announced a "Sing Out! Advertising Policy" on the opening page, listing six guidelines for advertisements. The guidelines emphasized the importance of truthfulness and appropriateness of ads. For example, the second rule stated, "All advertising shall be subject to the same rules of good taste that the editors apply to articles and songs that appear in SING OUT!" Although there was no definition of what constitutes "good taste," the policy insisted that the ads should conform to the atmosphere of the magazine. In terms of the truthfulness of the ads, the policy stipulated that "All ads shall be truthful" and that "the editors reserve the right to ask advertisers to submit advertised products

Editorial

SING OUT! ADVERTISING POLICY

In response to numerous requests from readers and advertisers, we publish here the principles that guide the advertising policy of SING OUT!

SING OUT! accepts paid advertising in its pages as a service to its readers. We make our pages available to those companies whose products and services will be of interest to our readers.

SING OUT! accepts advertising with the following understanding:

1. All ads shall be truthful. Advertisements which misinform, mislead, exaggerate, make false claims, or attempt by the use of language or gimmicks to deceive the reader will be arbitrarily refused.
2. All advertising shall be subject to the same rules of good taste that the editors apply to articles and songs that appear in SING OUT! The editors reserve the right to refuse advertising which, in their opinion, does not meet such standards.
3. No cut-price advertising will be accepted.
4. Advertising that is not consistent in appearance with the general appearance of the magazine will not be accepted.
5. The editors reserve the right to ask advertisers to submit advertised products and/or premiums

- for examination before accepting the advertising.
6. Advertising is accepted with the understanding that placement of ads in SING OUT! is completely at the discretion of the editors -- and that no commitments will be made at any time as to the placement of any particular ad.

WORTH QUOTING

"We are the post-Bartok generation. No matter what our age, we cannot write as if Leadbelly or Charles Mingus were a century ahead of us rather than our forefathers."

Walter Lowentfels

SING OUT!

Volume 15 July
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Folk Festivals Bruce Jackson
Associate Editors Pete Seeger
Jerry Silverman
Ed Badeaux
Joanne Grant
Julius Lester
Circ. Manager Bobbi Rabinowitz
Advertising Mgr. Elliot Loebel

On the Cover

Civil rights demonstrators in Selma, Alabama, sing freedom songs in front of the Dallas County courthouse. See pages 7-18 for a folksinger's report on the Selma-Montgomery march. UPI photo.

Fig. 9.

and/or premiums for examination before accepting the advertising."⁷⁵ The policy suggested that the editors were making a conscious effort to control advertising. The editorial board of the magazine tried hard to contain commercialism, to find a way to reconcile both their principles and commercialism (Fig.9).

Thus *Sing Out!* magazine between 1950-1967 demonstrated the history of the advertisements making the transition from inconspicuous announcements to product-oriented ads to consumer-oriented ones. This change over time recapitulated the longer history of mainstream advertising itself. Conventional advertising techniques, such as brand identification and endorsements of celebrities were used. In particular, addressing the anti-commercial, anti-mass culture sentiment of the folk music revival, the ads emphasized the "craftsmanship," the fact that the products were sold directly from the factory, and the specificity of each

product. They also stressed brand names and asserted the individuality of the products at the same time. As well, the advertisements from the late 1960s showed what Thomas Frank would call hip consumerism by stressing individuality and non-conformity. As *Sing Out!* advertising policy indicated, the advertisements appearing in the magazine attempted a compromise between commercialism and the folk music revival.

VI CONCLUSION

This study of *Sing Out!* magazine demonstrated that the folk music revival in the 1950s and the 1960s, although having a strong anti-commercial and anti-mass culture aura, not only resisted but was aided by commercialism. The attitude that the folk music revivalists and supporters had toward mainstream commercialism was neither a straightforward rejection nor a blind acceptance. The business side, too, as represented by the advertisers, addressed anti-commercial sentiments central to the folk music revival. The ambiguity of the relationship became apparent in the 1950s and the 1960s as participants in the folk music revival, just like those involved in the New Left activism, emerged from the population that lived closely with post-war affluence and consumerism. Political activism, a search for authenticity, and critiques of mainstream America were therefore intertwined with commercialism, as manifested in various aspects of *Sing Out!* magazine.

Sing Out! circulated both songs and ideas and served as a forum for serious critics to discuss issues related to the folk music revival. The opinions expressed in the articles in *Sing Out!* magazine revealed that these critics tried to identify authentic folk music and to assess the effect of commercialism on the folk music revival in a variety of ways. The series of debates centering on the question of whether commercialism aided or harmed folk traditions demonstrated the different interpretations of commercialism proposed by critics. The differences served to negate the binary view of the relationship between “authentic” culture and mainstream commercialism.

Commodification of folk music played a major role in the folk music revival. Although the popularity of folk music rested on its anti-commercial, anti-mass culture roots, it also depended on a post-war prosperity characterized by mass production and mass distribution. Consumption was a major way to enter into the folk music revival. The anti-mass culture credo of the folk music revival of “do-it-yourself” also

depended on a large supply of commodified products, such as instruments and instruction books. This was another way in which commercialism was intricately intertwined with the folk music revival.

Advertisements from *Sing Out!* demonstrated that mainstream commercialism was not static but transformed itself to accommodate the counterculture. On the one hand, ads increased and became more elaborate, reflecting the development of mainstream advertising; the increased advertisements also challenged the principles of the magazine. On the other hand, the ads addressed the anti-commercial and anti-mass culture sentiment. Furthermore, through regulating advertisements, the magazine's editorial board tried to contain commercialism within the bounds of their principles.

This study of the folk music magazine served as a case study of counterculture's complex and contested relationship with commercialism. The relationship is counterintuitive, as one might expect a clear and strong rejection of commercialism in this historical moment when anti-commercial sentiment was the strongest. This case study demonstrated that even the most anti-commercial and anti-mass culture movement negotiated with commercialism and sought for ways to live with its principles as well as the commercialism necessary for the success of the folk music revival.

NOTES

¹ *Sing Out!* 16 (Feb.–Mar. 1966), 1.

² The “counterculture” in this paper refers to the anti-establishment values and lifestyle held and promoted by young people in reaction to their parents' generation during the 1960s. Accordingly, the “counterculture” does not refer exclusively to the hippies culture in the late 1960s.

³ Thomas Frank, *The Conquest of Cool: Business Culture, Counterculture, and the Rise of Hip Consumerism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997).

⁴ A similar argument concerning rock music was made by Timothy Miller, who argued that while the hippies regarded rock as representing anti-commercial values, the music enjoyed commercial success. See Timothy Miller, *Hippies and American Values* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1991).

⁵ “Folk Frenzy,” *Time*, July 11, 1960, 81.

⁶ “It's Folksy . . . It's Delightful, It's a Craze,” *Newsweek*, June 6, 1960.

⁷ Bruno Nettl, *Folk Music in the United States: An Introduction* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1976 [1960]), 22–23.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 26.

⁹ Robbie Lieberman, *My Song Is My Weapon: People's Songs, American Communism, and the Politics of Culture, 1930–1950* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989).

¹⁰ There are different interpretations as to when the folk music revival started. The most common understanding is the late 1950s, and scholars including Ronald Cohen and Robert Cantwell agree. See Ronald Cohen, *Rainbow Quest: The Folk Music Revival and American Society, 1940–1970* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2002) and Robert Cantwell, *When We Were Good: The Folk Revival* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996). Pete Seeger and Alan Lomax, on the other hand, identified the 1930s as the beginning of the folk music revival in the U.S. See Howard Grafman and B. T. Manning, eds., *Folk Music U.S.A.* (New York: Citadel Press, 1962), 9–11. Benjamin Filene emphasized the continuity of the folk music revival throughout the twentieth century. See Benjamin Filene, *Romancing the Folk: Public Memory and American Roots Music* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

¹¹ Cantwell, *When We Were Good*, 2.

¹² Susan J. Douglas, *Listening In: Radio and the American Imagination from Amos 'n' Andy and Edward R. Murrow to Wolfman Jack and Howard Stern* (New York: Times Books, 1999), 268.

¹³ Quoted in Cantwell, *When We Were Good*, 332.

¹⁴ Wini Breines, *Young, White, and Miserable: Growing Up Female in the Fifties* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), 136.

¹⁵ Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1988), 163.

¹⁶ Doug Rossinow, *The Politics of Authenticity: Liberalism, Christianity, and the New Left in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 2.

¹⁷ Frank, *Conquest of Cool*, 15.

¹⁸ “The First Issue,” *Sing Out!* 1 (May 1950), 2.

¹⁹ Irwin Silber, [no title given], in “Wasn’t That A Time!”: *Firsthand Accounts of the Folk Music Revival*, ed. Ronald Cohen (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1995), 96.

²⁰ “The First Issue,” 2.

²¹ Roger Deitz, “‘If I Had a Song . . .’ A Thumbnail History of Sing Out!,” *Sing Out!* (March 1995), 17.

²² *Ibid.*, 20.

²³ *Ibid.*, 21.

²⁴ Pete Seeger, *The Incomplete Folksinger*, ed. Jo Metcalf Schwartz (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1972), 24–25.

²⁵ Deitz, “‘If I Had a Song. . .,’” 21.

²⁶ Irwin Silber, personal communication via e-mail, June 3, 2003.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 24; Cantwell, *When We Were Good*, 280.

²⁸ Silber, personal communication.

²⁹ Deitz, “‘If I Had a Song. . .,’” 24.

³⁰ Silber, personal communication.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Cantwell, *When We Were Good.*, 280.

³³ Silber, personal communication.

³⁴ Deitz, “‘If I Had a Song. . .,’” 25.

³⁵ Silber, personal communication.

³⁶ Filene, *Romancing the Folk*, 63.

³⁷ Ron Radosh, “Commercialism and the Folk Song Revival,” *Sing Out!* 8 (Spring 1959), 27.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 27.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁴⁰ Alan Lomax, “The ‘Folkniks’—and The Songs They Sing,” *Sing Out!* 9 (Summer 1959), 30.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 30.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 31.

⁴³ John Cohen, "In Defense of City Folksingers," *Sing Out!* 9 (Summer 1959), 32.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 33.

⁴⁵ G. Legman, "Folksongs, Fakelore, Folkniks, and Cash," *Sing Out!* 10 (October-November 1960), 29–35.

⁴⁶ D. K. Wilgus, "All Is Not Nonsense and Hard Cash," *Sing Out!* 11 (Feb-March 1961), 26.

⁴⁷ Stephen Fiott, "In Defense of Commercial Folksingers," *Sing Out!* 12 (December-January 1962), 43–45.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 44.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 45.

⁵⁰ Dan Armstrong, "'Commercial' Folksongs—Product of 'Instant Culture,'" *Sing Out!* 13 (February-March 1963), 20–22.

⁵¹ Sociologist Simon Frith, who presented the concept of "music-as-commodity" as a twentieth century phenomenon, pointed out the irony of rock fans who would "treat record-buying as an act of solidarity" so as to reconcile their anti-commercialist position and their acts of consumption. See Simon Frith, "Rock and Politics of Memory," *Social Text* 9/10 (Spring-Summer 1984), 66.

⁵² Cantwell, *When We Were Good*, 163–64.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 332–4.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 243.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ Quoted in David Dunaway, *How Can I Keep from Singing: Pete Seeger* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1981), 248.

⁵⁷ Barbara Dane, "The Music Merchants' Show: A Folksinger's Report," *Sing Out!* 15 (November 1965), 53.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 53.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 49.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 53.

⁶¹ *Sing Out!* 9 (Summer 1959), 27.

⁶² Dunaway, *How Can I Keep from Singing*, 189.

⁶³ "Guitars Hit a Cashbox Crescendo," *Business Week*, May 8, 1965, 155.

⁶⁴ "Folk Frenzy," *Time*, July 11, 1960, 81.

⁶⁵ Josh Dunson and Moses Asch, "Is Cash Killing Folk Music?" in *The American Folk Scene: Dimensions of the Folksong Revival*, eds. David A. DeTurk and A. Poulin, Jr. (New York: Dell, 1967), 310–313.

⁶⁶ Roland Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream: Making Way for Modernity 1920–1940* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).

⁶⁷ Frank, *The Conquest of Cool*, 76.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 67–68.

⁶⁹ *Sing Out!* 10 (Oct-Nov 1960), 31.

⁷⁰ *Sing Out!* 11 (April-May 1961).

⁷¹ *Sing Out!* 11 (Dec.-Jan. 1961–62).

⁷² *Sing Out!* 11 (Summer 1961).

⁷³ *Sing Out!* 11 (Oct-Nov 1961).

⁷⁴ *Sing Out!* 16 (Feb-March 1966).

⁷⁵ "Sing Out! Advertising Policy," *Sing Out!* 14 (January 1964), 2.